1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

LIVELIHOOD IN SILWA

the winter crop or summer crop respectively. The villagers depend mainly on a kind of clay (nitrous soil) brought from the eastern cliffs as fertilizer, called 'marog'. On camel- or donkey-back it is brought to the fields after a journey of approximately six miles which takes about four hours there and back. The saline properties of 'marog' are recognized by colour and taste. In addition, pigeon and chicken droppings, soil impregnated with stable-dung, and oven-ashes are also used to supplement the 'marog'. Chemical fertilizers are used by only very few people who have neither animals nor children to bring the 'marog', or by those who have so much land for which they could not possibly collect all the required 'marog' and hence have to supplement it by chemical fertilizer. Chemical fertilizer is usually preferred to nitrous clay for the cultivation of cash crops, sugar-cane and cotton, the area of which does not exceed thirty acres for the whole village.

With the help of my informant, Ali, I have tried to calculate the amount of time needed for the entire process of cultivation of both the winter and summer crops. It is obvious that such a task is a somewhat complicated one. However, we took the feddan as the functional unit of measurement and had to assume certain criteria for the labour in the farm unit. We had to answer questions such as: How many hours does a farmer work in the field in a day or during different periods of work? To what extent is the difference in output affected by physical conditions? What tools, implements and animals do we assume to be owned by the farmer for our calculations? How many children are assumed to be working on the farm, and what age groups are represented? However, we agreed to take a family, composed of a father, having two children, aged eight and thirteen, owning a camel, and working on an acre as the basis of our calculations. This unit was not entirely arbitrary, as the average size of the family unit is between five and six persons. To include two boys in such a family is not beyond the law of probability. The age represents one child under compulsory schooling, helping his father in the afternoon, while the other boy has just left school on reaching adolescence, when he can be relied upon to bring the fertilizer from the hill. The camel has been chosen as the median unit for the animal contribution to the farm work. It is true that not every farmer owns a camel, but alternatively he might well have a donkey to bring fertilizer and a cow for ploughing. In this case, he could lend his cow for ploughing to a farmer having a camel, and ask him in return for his camel to help him bringing extra fertilizer. One farmer may possess a plough and a donkey, and thus he can get extra help in conveying fertilizer by lending his plough. If a farmer has a third boy he could send him to help in working with another farmer in return for some needed help. However, every farmer possesses a donkey or a camel for loading as a necessary productive agent in agriculture. Thus the writer feels that the unit chosen is a feasible productive unit, representing the average working conditions.

1: Ammar E, 1-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

back'. He added that the prophetic tradition runs that if people are contented, God will look after them as He looks after the birds that leave their nests on feeling hungry and return to them well satisfied. Another prophetic tradition maintains that there are two types of people whose hunger is never satisfied, the searcher for knowledge and the searcher for wealth, and while the first is praised the second is condemned. This does not mean that the Koran or the prophetic tradition encourages apathy, as one can quote other statements conducive to hard work. But the mere fact that the statements, related by Ali and uttered by a great number of the literate villagers, are those exalting contentment, asceticism and submission to fate, to the exclusion of any others, shows a kind of selectivity in values entertained by the villagers. The writer was struck, however, by the amount of frugality and economic calculations of the villagers, in spite of their being frequently dubbed as fatalists. Their fatalism is usually a justification for the misfortune that befalls them, as epitomized by their saying, 'What is written on the forehead, must be seen by the eye'. On the other hand, they have another maxim saying that 'If one's back itches, there's nothing like one's finger to scratch it and give comfort'. Contentment thus actually means satisfaction with what one can get without the undue strain of striving to get ahead or the strenuous efforts for satisfying numerous material demands. It would be very difficult, with the fellah's simple tools and the sweat involved in his work, to convince him that his lot could be improved by more work. 'Both attitudes—contentment and acquisitiveness—have their own social context. Contentment is adopted in a close economy; acquisitiveness in an expanding economy. Without economic opportunities the striving for material gain is a disturbance to existing order, since it means the plunder of wealth from others. Whatever form this plunder may take, it is a curse to the common man. Therefore, to accept and be satisfied with the social role and material rewards given by the society is essential. But when economic opportunity develops through the development of technology, and when wealth can be acquired through exploitation of nature instead of through the exploitation of man, the doctrine of contentment becomes reactionary because it restricts individual initiative.'[1]

The attitude of contentment manifests itself also in those villagers who work in towns, for immediately they feel that they have enough money to last them for some time, they return to the village to live amongst their people till they run short of money, whereupon they return to the town.

Contentment as a value, however, does not, of course, prevent the villagers from looking at things and acts in economic terms. Even the welter of their formal and informal social contacts has an economic significance. Help given to friends and relatives is a debt which is expected to be returned, in spite of the magnanimous phrases associated with its rendering, such as 'There is no calculation between us' or 'It makes no difference between friends'.

[1] H. Fei and C. Chang, *Earthbound China*, London, 1949, p. 84.

1: Ammar E, I-5 (1951) 1954
MR13 Fellahin MR13
Silwa

should be declined by saying, 'God compensates me in a better way'.

The following three instances are concrete situations showing the working of the social structure. The first is the installation of a new corn mill by all the clans in the village to bring to an end the monopoly of the already existing privately owned mill. The rough estimates were divided into 24 kirats (parts), each section responsible for collecting the money equivalent to its 12 kirats.[1] In the second process of distribution, each section divides its share amongst the clans, and the head of each clan is responsible for collecting his share from family heads; by dividing his kirats into sahms, the people of his clan could buy a minimum of one-tenth of a sahm. No section or clan could be helped or its shares be taken by another. It was interesting to listen to the village crier calling out the names of the clans and the two sections, to induce haste in collecting the money.

Such procedure was followed for repairing the village mosque. In this case the question was not so much that of collecting money, as of recruiting the men to bring stone, water, straw, etc., for the repairs; and this was also dealt with on the same structural basis.

The third instance was the allocation of new building land to the village, which was also first divided into two sections; then each section was divided into equal parts amongst its clans, which in turn had to divide its share among the families.

The system of village government reflects a combination of central authority agents and the village social organization. The village head is an official called 'Omda' who used to be elected from a list of five people who own not less than 10 feddans. Two years ago, the law was changed and the Omda is now elected from amongst thirteen people who own enough land to make them eligible. The job is unpaid and it is reckoned as a privilege to be elected. The Omda's seniority is something like the medieval *primus inter pares*. He represents the village on official occasions. One of his traditional and honorary functions is to receive guests, travellers, and government officials in his guest house. Silwa has also two unpaid 'Sheikhs' each representing one of the two sections of the village and thus commonly referred to as 'Sheikh hissa'; these are also elected from amongst those who are eligible (minimum requirement was 5 feddans, now being relaxed). The Omda and the two sheikhs settle the disputes that arise in the village, usually with the aid of Arab councils, or with the help of people whom they select on different occasions. Each sheikh is primarily concerned with the problems of his section (hissa).

The central government is represented by the police headquarters with a police officer or constable in charge and policemen and ghafeers. While the policemen are always from outside the village, the ghafeers are villagers, put up usually from different clans, acting as the Omda's messengers, as well as the local agents between the village and the police headquarters.

[1] The feddan has 24 kirats, and each kirat 12 sahms.

wheel carrying a long chain of pots which move mouth downward into the water to fill, and then tip out their water into the channel as they arrive at the top. The *saqia* and the Archimedean screw have been continuously in use since the times of the Ptolemies.

A *saqia*, costing as it does from L.E. 10 to L.E. 20, according to its depth, is often the common property of several families. Each family in turn brings its own beast to draw water, and the work goes on without any break. One feddan can be irrigated in this way in 24 hours, and one *saqia* can supply five feddans.

The fellah's task is to goad the animal, to watch the turning of the wheel and the flow of water, and to avoid wastage on the way to the field, which may be anything up to three furlongs away. Usually an old man or a child is left in charge, and as the ungreased wheels continue their ceaseless groaning, the child hums for joy at every movement he makes.

The *saqia*, with variations such as the *taboot* or water-wheel, is found in its thousands all over Egypt. Under the name of *noria* it is used by peasants in Syria, North Africa, Spain, Italy and Greece.

It is clear that the business of watering makes very great demands on the fellah's energy and endurance. Yet he is not satisfied with the strict minimum, and is often accused of giving the soil too much water.

He does not understand that frequent and copious watering raises the underground water-level, and that when this reaches four feet below the surface it stifles the roots and makes the plants turn yellow. He only knows the evil effects of drought. So when his turn comes he never wastes a moment, but gives his crop as much water as he can. To him, lack of water means a failure or at least a low crop; and that means poverty. There is no question that innumerable troubles and anxieties beset the fellah in his efforts to get the water which he needs for his little plot. The overseers of irrigation in the provinces and the watchmen whose duty it is to see to the opening of sluices often disregard the orders and regulations which assure a just supply. In this matter favouritism, injustice and even personal spite are often indulged in with impunity.

proves the capacities of the fellah. Here again the question of education comes in.

Nowadays the resistance to enlistment should be growing less. The men are better treated. When they leave the army, in decent clothes, after five years of service under military discipline, they have lost their uncouthness and become *effendis*, gentlemen.

When a fellah is in barracks, or when he has taken up work in a town so as to make a little money, he never forgets his native village, and homesickness shows on his stolid face. He tries at least to keep up contact with home and to retain some of its habits. Many a time the author has written letters at the dictation of these illiterate peasants, who hate being uprooted. It is always the same story: "Tell me how the crops are getting on. Give my best wishes to So-and-so, and to So-and-so".

If the vital interests of a village are in immediate danger, each villager feels a strong sense of unity with the group; men, women, and children unite in a single force. Witness the dramatic affair of Abu Shâdy in 1936. As part of a scheme to reorganise the drainage the Irrigation Department had decided to cut off a canal that had watered the whole district for thirty years. The entire population rose against the labourers, against the police, even against the military, to prevent the diversion of the water. They held out against all these forces for several days. The women stood in the front line to urge on the men, the children provided a supply of missiles, and a regular strategy was improvised.

When a moneylender, a landowner, or a *nâzer* has carried his exactions too far, and is killed with public approval, the finest sleuth cannot discover the murderer, so close is the conspiracy of silence. Should one village, or even a few people belonging to it, insult or injure the next, the inhabitants of the latter show a united front and avenge the insult with stones, clubs or guns (for many fellaheen possess these forbidden arms. Thanks, however, to the intervention of the police, these village wars are becoming less common, though private feuds are still as frequent, as fierce, and as sudden as ever (**).

Here is one of the contradictions of fellah life. In the village everybody knows everybody else, and no-one would

ever be allowed to die of hunger. The mutual help of the men in field-work and of the women in housework, the more readily given as poverty is greater, deserves every commendation. The way in which the fellaheen will work to accomplish something in the common interest, when they are not under orders, shows what they are capable of. Yet when land, a woman, or an *'omda* is in question, rival parties are established and the feud is kept up in every family from generation to generation. Everyone in the village has to take sides. Neutrals are despised. The antagonism, though usually latent, will show itself suddenly over some trivial matter, such as the shifting of a boundary mark, a theft of manure, or a *gamoossa* trespassing. Then human life counts for nothing, and death takes a holiday, especially in villages where there is Arab blood in the fellah's veins.

Thus life is lived in constant insecurity. To feel this, one must spend a night in a village. As soon as night falls precautions are taken against a possible foe. The cattle, including the camel if there is one, are brought indoors and shut in the house. The family also take refuge together behind the great closed door. The head of the house often stays outside watching his field or his water, for the enemy is always on the prowl. As the shadows deepen, the dogs begin to bark and gunshots become frequent.

The shots come not only from the unsleeping watchman, trying to reassure himself and everyone else, but also from fellaheen armed going in defiance of the law. During harvest the fellaheen become even more suspicious, and may be seen with a rifle slung over their shoulders as they stand with their feet in water to gather the last tufts of cotton.

In May 1936 the village of Qalandol was divided into two camps over the selection of an *'omda* — the friends of Mahmud Bakr on the one side, and those of Aly Abbas on the other. Mahmud Bakr made some slanderous remarks about his opponent, and one morning his son was found dead in the fields. A few days later the sister of Aly Abbas was stabbed as a reprisal. After that, for a whole year, both sides watched and waited. Neither work nor journeys were undertaken alone, but always in groups. One market day, when crowds of fellaheen had come from villages near, a young man of the party of Mahmud Bakr was insulted by an opponent, whom he struck. At once the supporters of Aly Abbas